

How To Find A Family Law Attorney

by former Principal Bibi Berry

Suppose you are considering filing for divorce. Perhaps you have a custody, visitation or child support issue that needs to be resolved. Maybe you want a prenuptial agreement or a postnuptial agreement prepared. Or let's say you have some other family-related issue that requires the knowledge and experience of a good family law attorney. Where do you even begin?

Your first step should be to search for attorneys and law firms in the county or area in which you reside, or if children are at issue, in proximity to where they reside. Experienced family law attorneys can cost you \$300 an hour and up; the last thing you want to spend your money on is more travel time than necessary. Of course, it can sometimes make sense to hire a Montgomery County lawyer to handle your Prince George's County matter, if you find someone with whom you're comfortable, who has a great reputation and has established a track record of success in handling cases that may be similar to yours.

How do you find out about an attorney's reputation? Well, your best bet is to ask friends, family and co-workers for referrals. You also can check websites such as "lawyers.com" and "avvo," but, be wary, since the reviews may not always be accurate. These sites rely on the reviewer's honesty in assessing both the lawyer's work and his or her character, and with regard to whether they were ever actually clients of the attorney being reviewed in the first place. Keep in mind that one or two good - or bad - reviews may not paint an accurate picture and should not be the sole basis for making a decision.

You should, of course, visit the attorney. An initial consultation can go a long way in helping you determine if a particular lawyer is right for you. Be leery of attorneys who speak in absolutes and guarantees. You might not want to hear the truth, but a good attorney will "tell it like it is."

Consider experience and specialization - and carefully assess whether the attorney you're looking at practices mostly family law. There are many nuances to this practice area, some of which can take years to learn. That doesn't mean working with a less seasoned attorney is a bad thing. In fact, it often lowers costs and sometimes means that lawyer may be more readily available to answer questions. You do, however, want to inquire as to whether that attorney works with someone with more depth of experience who will supervise your matter - depending on its complexity.

One factor I believe to be very important in selecting family law representation is the attorney's personality. You might believe it is best to have a lawyer who is an aggressive "pit bull" type. Just remember that "aggressive" does not mean "better," "smarter" or "more knowledgeable," and many times, it does mean spending more of your money to fight unnecessary battles.

The issues between you and the other party may not be simple enough to be worked out on a cocktail napkin, but whether it is custody concerns or disagreements about property or money, most matters are not so complex they cannot be resolved before you go broke litigating. It is always preferable to have the attorneys work together to come up with a reasonable solution with which you both can live. That's particularly beneficial in cases when there are complex property/financial matters.

Having an experienced attorney on your side can also eliminate or at least minimize any difficulties arising when there is a disparity between each party's knowledge regarding their own finances and assets or their comfort level with the litigation process. The smart litigants know that intellect, resourcefulness, perseverance, experience, honesty and civility are all traits that make for a much more useful - and solution-oriented - advocate. That also means a less stressful and less expensive experience for you during litigation.

This is not to suggest you want to find an attorney that's a pushover. The better lawyers are those who balance strength and civility in pursuit of their client's interests. Your search for a family law attorney will hopefully produce someone whose experience and knowledge of the law is matched by an equally thoughtful and reasoned approach to representing you.